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## CERTAIN OF THE CHICAGO SCHOOL OF FICTION.

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

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I LIKE a large loose phrase such as I have set over this paper, because, if it bags here and there, or is too long in the sleeves, or hangs off in the back, it can be fitted to the figure, with a little use of the shears; but if a phrase is too tight to begin with, if the coat is cut strictly according to a scant pattern of cloth, nothing can be done to adapt it; and if the wearer insists upon keeping it on, from motives of economy or modesty, the effect is, even if pathetic, ridiculous. One may say there is no Chicago school of fiction, but this might be as wanting in truth as my phrase is possibly superabundant in it. A good deal depends upon what one means by school, and if I mean by the Chicago school much the same as I should mean by the Boston school of poetry in the time of the great five or six poets of twenty-five years ago, or the Knickerbocker school when Poe and his contemporaries were living in New York, or the San Francisco school when Mr. Clemens and Mr. Charles Warren Stoddard, and Bret Harte, and others were clinging to the perilous incline of the Pacific Slope, then I think I am fairly justified in speaking of a Chicago school. Or if the reader wishes to be very fastidious, and denies to the notable group of Chicago writers, now doing rather more than their share of the best literary work in the country, the central unity which would constitute it a school, then I am willing to speak of the Mr. Henry B. Fuller school, the Mr. George Ade school, the Mr. F. P. Dunne school, the Mr. Will Payne school, the Mr. Robert Herrick school, and, by no manner of means least, though last, the Miss Edith Wyatt school. There are several other well-known writers of the same habitat, whom I might name a school

for, if, with the perversity of strong convictions, I did not choose to ignore them because they are not realistic enough for my taste. I do not speak of the Mr. Hamlin Garland school, because he seems to me to belong farther West, though he has lived much of the time in Chicago; or of the Mr. Brand Whitlock school, because, though he received his training in journalism and political knowledge in Chicago, he now lives in Ohio; or of the Frank Norris school, because his young manhood was spent in California, though his birth and his formative years were Chicagoan. But I name all these admirable artists together, not only from a spirit of Mid-Western chauvinism, but in order to point the fact that there is no group in any other locality which will quite bear comparison with them. This should be enough to set readers in other sections against them, and to make my authors, each and all, wish that I had withheld such a damaging recognition of their excellence.

# I.

The truth is, however, that I do not think I should be writing of them just now, if it were not for the pleasure, which I feel the need of expressing, lately given me by Miss Edith Wyatt's very delightful novel "True Love." If my pleasure is so great that it overflows in praise of her literary fellow-citizens, that may be regretted, but it cannot be helped; though it arises, I believe, from a charm in all her work which is peculiarly her own. This was something so exquisite in her first book, "Every One His Own Way," that the reader who felt it there, might well have trembled for the attempt to impart its delicate quality to a larger form than that of those sketches. But the author has made the attempt, and signally succeeded. Whatever amused the sense of humor, and took the fancy, and won the heart, in the friendly wit, the subtle playfulness, of the first book, is here no less in the second. The perfect sanity, the absolute wholesomeness, the fascinating common sense, are here the ground from which a flower of entire grace again springs fresh and fragrant. The author's work, so far, is the apotheosis of the democratic spirit; the material is what you please to call it. If you yourself have been so distinguished by your Maker as to have some essential difference from your fellow-creatures, you will think it very common; but if you are upon the whole not able to make out that you

are better than most others, you will be disposed, as I am, to rejoice that the average of human nature is so apparently good, and kind, and beautiful as Miss Wyatt sees it. Not that she sees it all of an equal amiability or loveliness. There are several figures in "True Love," as in "Every One His Own Way," who are otherwise, though they are recognized with an irony so light and compassionate as never to find it out. There is a prig in "True Love" whom one loathes, but he does not know it; and there are some fools whom one loves and honors, and two or three gloomy frumps whom one is glad to meet under the protection of their often humorous and always good-humored relatives, who mostly prevail. The story is not as sure of its own mind as the conventional story is; it is like one's own story in not being certain of the relative importance of its different persons and events. First, there is the love of the dull but beautiful Inez Marsh and the prig Norman Hubbard, which might better be called their self-love; and then there is the love of Emily Marsh, the agreeable, sensible, rather pretty and charming girl, who almost knows how funny her father and her brother Tom are, and Dick Colton, the young enterprising hotel-keeper of Centreville, who has got himself forward while helping other people in every direction, and who is as common as the earth, and as good. Strangely enough, the lovers and self-lovers have families about them, and do not exist in the splendid isolation of romantic lovers; they have fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and the like, and these are not treated as mere pieces of mechanism for transacting the lovers' passion, or inhumanly slighted as such characters are by most novelists, but are admirably studied and found extremely interesting. The two Marshes, fathers respectively of Inez and Emily, are such quaint, true, wise, amusing Americans as make one glad and proud of one's country; their wives who rule and obey them, but are never in the joke of them, are of a precious and wholly satisfied commonplaceness which only Miss Wyatt (now Jane Austen is no longer writing) can give the sense of.

Miss Wyatt shows her rare gift in nothing more than in the portraiture of two or three half-grown boys, alarmed for the respectability of their families; and she gives us almost as novel a pleasure in the psychology of a little flirt, who might have remained harmless, but whose final selfishness precipitates the tragedy of her sweet-hearted, silly young husband, and who finds herself

lifted to the height where she feels she ought always to have been, when her priggish brother-in-law, though he at first cruelly snubbed her, feels her fascination, at another's suggestion, and marries her. I should have been ready to say Fanny Colton was the great triumph of the story, if I had not thought in time of Emily Marsh, whose sense and kindness and unselfishness are quite as convincingly painted. But, so far as I could note, there was no erring in the touch with which any of the figures are done; the aged and middle-aged figures are ascertained with as fine a fidelity as those ridiculous and adorable boys. The perfectly sincere, but utterly affected author of the great romantic novel, "Chillingsworth," Thirly Thompson, is the most delicious fool in fiction since Mr. Collins, but he is a fool you give your heart to.

For my own comfort, perhaps, if I had been very exacting, I might have chosen to have the course of "True Love" run to its prosperous close, without any very tragic incidents. But I am obliged to own that hotels do burn down, and fine fellows lose their money in real life, and that dreadful things happen to the light of head and heart as well as to natures of weightier substances. I feel that therefore I must not shrink from these things in fiction, though they are not of such every-day occurrence as theatre-party dinners at Madam Hubbard's in Chicago, or dances at the Colton House in Centreville, or drives on the River Road, which I much prefer. The author, indeed, offers me compensation in a thousand little humorous touches throughout the story, and sets before me the untragedied average of the tale with such magic that I seem, with my own commonness, to be part of it: I know the other people in it do not think themselves too good for me; they are too kind for that. What I like nearly as much as I like them, is their fearlessly realized entourage, in Centreville as well as in Chicago. After all, nature is not such a bad model, even the nature which has not been in print before, and it is this sort of nature which Miss Wyatt daringly delights in. Her landscape is no more literary than her people are, and the motives she likes best to divine would be entirely novel if the reader did not recognize them in himself. If I am to descend to such poor particulars as her style and method, I must say that they have the same effect of originality; but, perhaps, if I came to examine them very minutely I should find them merely the

technique which we all use when we are simplest and clearest, and not thinking about how finely we shall say things. In this relation, I am almost ashamed to note the little break she has made in writing the New England, or, more specifically, the Boston accent. The natives of that city replace our nerve-racking Western letter *r* by a sort of aspirate, and never by the Dundreary *w*, which she seems to think they use.

It is the only false note in the book, and I might not have been aware of it if the art had not been otherwise so faultless. The spirit is always delightful, and of all our women writers, except Miss Jewett alone, Miss Wyatt seems most to have the precious quality which we desperately call "temperament," because we cannot think of the true word, or because there is none. These two writers, so several in their inspirations, are alike in the gentle humanity of their ideal, and together they go far to console an age which has no Jane Austen of its own. More than any others now living, they approach that divine creature in her supreme charm; and, if Miss Jewett is likest her in the delicate humor which consists with certain little patrician preferences, Miss Wyatt is liker still in the fine irony which plays with its victim and finally lets it go alive, and even insensible of the peril escaped.

Miss Wyatt's humor is a little richer, or, if not quite that, then fuller, because of its fresher and more varied sources; or if that is not quite a reasonable saying, then because of that democratic kindness, that instinct of equality which is the sense of justice prevalent in everything she has done. This is the really valuable contribution of the West, and of that Chicago in which the West has come to its consciousness, toward that poor American condition of English literature which has long been trying so hard to be itself in the face of such sore temptations to be something else. The democracy which was the faith of New England became the life of the West, and now it is the Western voice in our literary art. Mr. Fuller, indeed, had to reason to his democracy through the misgiving inspired by the Beautiful in the lands of tradition and convention, and it is the chief wonder of his very extraordinary work that, after being a chevalier of vain thoughts, he should have become a fellow-citizen of such solid realities. If there were no Chicago novels but the "Cliff Dwellers" and "With the Procession," I should say there was

a Chicago school of fiction. But when one can add to these Mr. Will Payne's "Money Captain," and that later story of his whose name, but not whose nature, escapes my decrepit memory, and the several novels of Mr. Robert Herrick, one feels safe against any adverse trial of one's conclusion. The peculiar Chicago note—I knew "note" would get in somewhere, it has been watching its chance from the beginning of this paper—is not less perceptible in the writer who came to Chicago full Boston-grown than in those to the manner born. The republic of letters is everywhere sufficiently republican; but in the metropolis of the Middle-West, it is so without thinking; it is so almost without feeling; and the atmospheric democracy, the ambient equality, is something that seems like the prime effect in literature of what America has been doing and saying in life ever since she first formulated herself in the Declaration.

## II.

There is something a little militant, a little aggressive, which is in the end a little defensive also, in Miss Wyatt's fine mockeries of the prigs, who are so interestingly the Chicago analogues of the snobs of elder societies. But in Mr. George Ade the American spirit arrives: arrives, puts down its grip, looks around, takes a chair and makes itself at home. It has no questions to ask and none to answer. There it is, with its hat pushed back, its hands in its pockets, and at its outstretched feet that whole vast, droll American world, essentially alike in Maine and Oregon and all the hustling regions between: speaking one slang, living one life, meaning one thing.

It is, I think, Mr. Ade's instinct of our solidarity and the courage of his instinct which has enabled him to go straighter to the heart of our mystery than any former humorist. He has lost no time, he has made no false moves from the beginning, so far as one knows his beginning. I myself knew it in his "Artie," which I hailed, with what noise I could, as a masterpiece in a sort as new as it was captivating. In that very surprising study of the kind of common young American who is never commonplace, there was a touch as absolute as the material was novel. Both touch and material were as authentic and genuine in "Pink Marsh," the portrait of a Chicago *post bellum* negro, as Western conditions have differenced him from the Southern and earlier type; and again, one felt the fresh air in one's face, and the

untrodden ground under one's feet in approaching the group at the Alfalfa Hotel, with that masterly figure of "Doc Horne" to welcome one with his courteous and friendly lies. Of course, this is not saying the thing, not giving the sense of character which so richly abounds without slopping into caricature in these pictures of an unerringly ascertained average of American life. No cataloguing of the excellencies of these books would give a notion of their people so frankly, so boldly and yet so delicately defined, so unmistakably shown, so undeniably true.

The level struck is low: the level of the street, which seems not depressed in the basement barber-shop where Pink Marsh polishes shoes, or lifted in the office where Artie talks to his friend and evolves himself and his simple love-story. It is the same level in the entrance floor of the Alfalfa, where Doc Horne sits with his forfuitous companions and harmlessly romances. You are not asked to be interested in any one because he is any way out of the common, but because he is every way in the common. Mr. Ade would not think of explaining or apologizing or at all accounting for the company he invites you to keep. He knows too well how good it is, and he cheerfully takes the chance of your not yourself being better.

It is his wonderful directness which is in case here, his perfect control in dealing with the American as the American knows himself. He does not prepare his specimens, or arrange a point of view for you. There the characters are, as they have walked in out of the sun, and they could not imagine your not being pleased to meet them. But you will make a great mistake if you fancy they are without refinement of their own, their point of honor. Artie is essentially as fine as he is frank. In the best things of a gentleman he is a gentleman. He is a fountain of slang, but his thought is as pure as any that flows from wells of English undefiled. Doc Horne is a lovable type of the older fashioned American with the elderly ideals of politeness, of chivalry, of personal dignity, which I do not believe even race suicide can obliterate in our nation, and his fellow-lodgers at the Alfalfa are worthy of his suave and gentle society: the Lightning Dentist, whose life amidst the extraction of thousands of teeth, is a dream of happy marriage; even the Book-Agent who is in lurking at the Alfalfa, pending his dream of happy divorce; even the poor Lush who in his cups first outrages and then



cherishes the Doc; even the insufferable Freckled Boy, even the wretched Hustler who swindles Doc Horne into a guiltless complicity in his swindling scheme. But what dreadful things am I saying? That these frail fellow-mortals are of the great American family in which we are all one. Pink Marsh is the colored brother in this family, and I love him like the rest.

If we come to the Fables in Slang, as I am coming, we have now four volumes and several hundreds of them forming a splendid triumph on terms which might well have warranted defeat after the first twenty or thirty. But our life, our good, kind, droll, ridiculous American life, is really inexhaustible, and Mr. Ade, who knows its breadths and depths as few others have known them, drops his net into it anywhere, and pulls it up full of the queer fish which abound in it. There seems never doubt of a catch in his mind, and so far there has been no failure. The form of these fables helps itself out with capital letters such as the nouns and other chief words of the old printings of *Æsop* used to wear, and there is a mock moral tagged to each, but each is really a little satire, expressing itself in the richest and freshest slang, but of a keenness which no most polished satire has surpassed, and of a candid complicity with the thing satirized—our common American civilization, namely—which satire has never confessed before. I am trying to get round to saying a thing I find difficult: that is, how the author posits his varying people in their varying situations without a word of excuse or palliation for either, in the full confidence that so far as you are truly American you will know them, and as far as you are truly honest you will own yourself of their breed and more or less of their experience. I will not load up this slight paper with any statement or analysis of them; everybody has read them, and knows what they are, and how, while they deal with any or every phase of our motley yet homogeneous existence, they deal chiefly with its chief interest, as it is, or as it has been, which the author calls *The Girl Proposition*.

He gives that name to his latest volume of fables, but it is the nature of nearly all. Somehow, more or less, they centre in it. Sometimes it is the old-girl proposition: the relation of husbands and wives in marriage or divorce; but mainly it is the young-girl proposition, as it should be in a republic so pastoral as ours, where the innocent love-making, innocent however vulgar, of

youthful unmarried people is the national romance. He divined that this was the great national concern, or else he has recognized it as such without being at the pains of any previous inspiration; and he has made it the ever-fascinating theme of his fables, as he had made it the theme of those earlier stories of his which one can hardly call novels. But even when the girl-proposition is not the theme of his allegory, it is so joy-givingly true to the circumstance and character which no one can deny, that when the fable comes with each successive Sunday paper, and you sit down to it, you are sure of five minutes away from all the tiresome unreality and pretence of the workaday week, and experience something of the bliss of looking at your own photograph, either as you once were or as you are now. So far as the girl-proposition involves the money-proposition, and it nearly always involves that more intimately or less intimately, the other great interest of our life enters into the scheme of Mr. Ade's literature. I mean the financial interest, which occupies us, never indeed exclusively of the girl-proposition, but antecedently and subsequently and concurrently. We are still, in spite of our multiplicity of millionaires, almost as universally concerned in getting on as we are in getting married or unmarried; and Mr. Ade knows this as he knows so much about us, without making any noise over his facts.

It would be interesting to know, but perhaps we never shall know—women are so reticent!—how much or little Mr. Ade's work pleases the sex with which it most interests itself, and perhaps most amuses itself. Here and there one of the hardier of the fair can doubtless be got to say that she adores it, just as some fearless, if faithless, women could be got to say they liked Thackeray in the simple-hearted old days when Thackeray was thought a cynic, and believed to be especially satirical of women. But probably, just as these were not too sincere in their profession, the female admirers of Mr. Ade's work are more courageous than veracious, if one may say such a thing without impeaching the veracity of the entire sisterhood. Possibly, if it were addressed to her personal candor, the magnanimous she might feel a delicious shock from his touch upon the defects of her qualities, or even the qualities of her defects; but I am obliged to believe that he must postpone an honest acceptance by the largest-reading sex to the production of some unblushing romance where he

shall paint woman the heroine she really knows herself to be, even when she chews gum, and wears corsets that give the fashionable shape, and a picture hat that it is a pity should ever have escaped from the picture.

Nothing could be more mistaken than a criticism that gave the notion of satire in Mr. Ade's mirth, as satire used to be. He is without any sort of literary pose. It is very caustic mirth, it is sarcasm of the frankest sort; but I suspect he would not count it gain if his laughter lessened the folly in the world. Folly, I fancy, he does not think such a very bad thing, and it is always the more or less innocent types of folly that he deals with, even when depicting those guiltlessly familiar and helplessly fond phases of the girl-proposition which are more characteristic of our civilization than of any other. It is the note (the word insists again, as if it had not already had its innings) of so much of the proposition as seen in the humbler walks of our life, if any of our walks are humble, that we should be the sadder if Mr. Ade's gayety with it should abash the ingenuousness of so much American love-making.

### III.

The wit of Mr. Ade has surprisingly little to do with the political proposition, which, equally with the girl-proposition, and rather beyond the money-proposition, occupies the national mind. Now and then, one of those luminous bolts of his wit lights up the political proposition with the glare of that awful knowledge of political ways and means to be acquired only in the newspaper school which trained him to literature. But otherwise his talent devotes itself to the girl-proposition, and to the money-proposition arising from it, and inalienably related to it. To supply the apparent defect of the Chicago school, and to carry forward a tradition of almost the greatest distinction in our self-study, and certainly of the earliest indigeneity, Mr. F. P. Dunne contributes his Dooley papers.

I have been reading the five volumes which these papers now fill, with the impression that there are not so many of them, and with a constant surprise that their very simple formula suffices for the treatment of so many of our social as well as political ills. There is always Mr. Dooley talking to Mr. Hinnessy, with much mention of a Mr. Hogan who never appears on the scene

of the dialogue, if in Mr. Hinnessy's strict subordination it is not rather a monologue. The scene is Mr. Dooley's bar, where the action that passes consists of one or other of the friends standing up or sitting down, or folding or unfolding a newspaper. But the whole drama of the nation, and largely the drama of the world, is represented in that simple setting through the comments of Mr. Dooley on passing events. Hardly any of these have escaped his notice in the years that have followed since the Cuban war and our acquisition of the Philippines. Each of the salient facts of the protracted pacification of our Pacific possessions has offered itself for Mr. Dooley to hang some wise or witty remark upon; and the tragi-comedy of the Boer war, the novel posturings of the German Emperor in his continuous cake-walk, the saddened circus of the English King's coronation, the bouffe aspects of the Dreyfus Case, the performances of Lieutenant Hobson in his search for his level, the varied activities of Admiral Dewey, the mysterious and difficult nature of anarchism, the Chinese situation and the future of China, the insular decisions of the Supreme Court, Mr. Carnegie's gifts and the Booker Washington incident, are a few of the public interests which have joined with a hundred social and human interests in attracting the censure of the Irish-American sage.

By way of preface to the volume "Mr. Dooley in Peace and War," Mr. Dunne, in as brilliant a little piece of analysis as I have lately seen (I like to put it modestly for him, or I should say, as I have ever seen), and in as graphic a study of conditions as I presently remember, tells in his own person what he knows of Mr. Dooley's nature and natural history. The humor, vibrant with a certain pride of race, and with a laughing consciousness of race-limitations, gives a captivating quality to this uncommon piece of self-criticism, but is to blame for leaving other criticism not so much to say of Mr. Dooley as it would like to say. It is at least left me, however, to venture upon the safe commonplace that no one but an Irish-American could have invented such an Irish-American, or have invested his sayings with such racial and personal richness. Dooley's characterization is, except in that preface, through his own talk, and the art of the author is felt in nothing so much as in his sensitive respect for Dooley's personality. Dooley is wise and shrewd and just for the most part; but from time to time he reaches a point where he is neither. He

gives out, he breaks, and he saves himself from falling down by an effort of pure humor which wins your heart. Mr. Dunne knows Mr. Dooley's limitations, and he does not force him beyond them in the interest of the best purpose. He knows that there are moments when his philosophical spectator of events must lapse into a saloon keeper, and he guards the precious integrity of his creation from the peril of perfunctory humanity. It is upon a review of the whole course of Mr. Dooley's musings on men and things that one recognizes Mr. Dunne as of the line of great humorists who have not failed us in our crises of folly or misdoing. To have one's heart in the right place is much; it is, in fact, rather indispensable; but to have one's head in the right place, also, adds immeasurably to the other advantage. It was not only because Hosea Biglow had such a good conscience, but because he had such a lot of good sense, that he approved Lowell so fine a humorist; and the generous instinct of Mr. Dunne would have been lost in Mr. Dooley if he had not known how to keep Mr. Dooley strictly within bounds as a character, sometimes sordid and sometimes stupid.

It is this admirable artistic discretion that imparts such exquisite pleasure in some of those quick turns by which Mr. Dunne saves Mr. Dooley from himself. Mr. Dooley starts out with an opinion without always knowing where it will carry him, and then with the flash of his Irish wit lights himself past the peril and goes gayly on again. He had not the least notion when he began how he was going to get out of it, and, to tell the truth, I do not believe Mr. Dunne had. The Irish wit came to *his* help too; and I could fancy with what sympathetic exultation he shared in Mr. Dooley's triumph. This agile suddenness in seizing a disadvantage and making it work for the author's intention, is the difference that distinguishes Mr. Dunne's humor from Mr. Ade's. With Mr. Ade there is no arrest and no turning. He has seen the end clear from the beginning, and he has gone for it straightforward and unfaltering. When I read a fable beginning, "Once there was a gum-chewer named Tessie, who ironed up her white dress, and bought seven yards of ribbon, and went on a picnic given by the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Horse-shoers Union," I am calmly glad in the security of a fully foreseen passage of life. When I read a Dooley paper I try to prepare myself for the delicious surprises which Mr. Dooley has in

store for Mr. Dunne, but I am not sure of any of them till it comes. Then I know that it is of the last effect of subtle irony, and could not be better if it had been meant from the first.

#### IV.

At this belated moment, I am aware of having intended to be more general about the Chicago school, if there is one, than I am afraid I have succeeded in being. After all, however, these three Chicagoans whom I have been celebrating are those of the latest note, and two of them are of the widest note. It will be some time until the world, to the world's loss meanwhile, knows Miss Wyatt's charming work as it knows the work of Mr. Ade and Mr. Dunne. This delay will afford more academic criticism than mine the opportunity of counselling her to apply her kindly and humorous imagination to the portrayal of persons in good society, with an especially large range of *grandes dames*, and not to waste them upon the commonplace people she seems to prefer. She would at once do this if she were imbued with the confusion of the cultured reader who is gifted with the inability to distinguish between the plastic process and the plastic material, and who cannot be expected to value her as an artist while she presents to him in her fiction types that he would avoid in life.

There is perhaps, also, the opportunity of seriously asking Mr. Dunne how long he expects to keep on the mask of Mr. Dooley, and why he does not come into the open with a bold, vigorous and incisive satire of our politicians and their methods. In like manner, Mr. Ade might well be asked to stop fabling, and to give us that great American novel which we have been passing round the hat for so long. We should want something very strong from him; something full of passion and incident, with a powerful central motive of the wildest romance.

I should not feel that I had fully discharged my duty as a metropolitan critic without some such suggestions, and, as an adoptive New-Yorker of recent naturalization, I feel that I ought to assert the superiority of the commercial capital in a broad and comprehensive view of the literature which it has not produced. I am aware that there is every appearance in the writers of the Chicago school, always if there is one, of being ahead of New York in a direction where none, possibly, would be more surprised than Chicago to find them in the van.

W. D. HOWELLS.